

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans

Statement

**Statement of
CONGRESSWOMAN PATSY T. MINK OF HAWAII
before the Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans
on
H.R. 3176,
to determine ways to restore the natural wetlands conditions
at Kealia Pond National Wildlife Refuge**

March 30, 2000

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Faleomavaega and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, it is my pleasure to testify today on H.R.3176. I appreciate the Subcommittee holding this hearing on an issue which is important to my constituents.

I introduced H.R. 3176 on October 28, 1999. The legislation would require the Secretary of the Interior to conduct a study to determine ways of restoring the natural wetlands conditions in Kealia Pond National Wildlife Refuge. The study would include an examination of hydrology, manmade impacts on wetlands, species succession and imbalances in natural habitat in the refuge. The legislation authorizes \$250,000 to conduct the study. The study would be reported to Congress not later than one year after funds for the study are made available.

The Refuge is located on the island of Maui and is part of the Mai Nui National Wildlife Refuge Complex. It was established in 1992 and consists of 691 acres. The pond itself is the largest natural pond in Hawaii, and covers between 400 and 500 acres at its greatest extent during the wet season. The pond is home of two endangered native Hawaiian birds, the Hawaiian stilt and the Hawaiian coot. The pond also provides food and shelter for numerous migratory waterfowl and shorebirds.

Human activity over the years has significantly changed the nature of the pond. In the early 1900's the pond had a depth of between six and eight feet. Over the years grazing and agricultural use of the land above the pond increased the runoff of sedimentation. Between 1925 and 1930 the pond was used as a rubbish dump, further reducing the depth of the pond. In 1970 twenty-five acres of land north of the pond were converted to a commercial aquaculture operation. Dikes were built, water impounded and a well dug.

All these activities have had a deleterious effect on the natural habitat of the pond. Now the pond has an average depth of only one foot. As the depth of the pond decreased the pond increasingly lost the ability to carry off sediments. Sand carried into the pond from adjacent dunes that otherwise would have been flushed away now stays in the pond further reducing the depth.

The shallow depth of the pond permits it to dry up quickly. The natural trade winds of the area then cause

great clouds of dust to arise. The dust blows into the homes, eyes and lungs of nearby residents. Breathing dust alone is bad enough, but residents have concerns about the makeup of the dust. The dust causes burning eyes and residents worry that the cause may be that the dust contains fertilizer and chemical residue from agricultural runoff and unknown chemicals from materials deposited during the period the pond was used as a dump.

The introduction of non-native species has also changed the ecology of the pond. The spotted wing midge was first identified in Hawaii in 1945. It is unknown when the midge first reached Kealia Pond, but it has found it to be an extremely attractive habitat. During the wet season, it breeds in huge numbers. During midge season the uninitiated visitor may think the refuge is on fire at dawn or dusk, with smoldering fires throwing up swirling clouds of smoke. But it is not smoke. It is clouds of midges swarming.

A study by Ducks Unlimited estimated that on any given day during the wet season there may be as many as 200 million adult and near-adult midges. The midges are attracted to light and the swarms invade surrounding residences. The midges are small enough to go through screens and some residents have been reduced to keeping their lights out in a vain effort to keep the invaders away. Motorists report that their cars are covered with squashed midges when driving in the area. The resulting stains are difficult to clean off windshields, grills and license plates.

Kealia Pond is also home to non-native tilapia. These fish make up 90 percent of the fish population of the pond. They do more damage than good for the wetlands. The fish breed and grow rapidly during the wet season. When the pond dries up there are massive fish die offs. As you can imagine, the stench from the dying fish is indescribable. In 1996 Maui correctional inmates, working under the direction of the pond's on-site manager, removed 14 tons of dead and rotting fish from the refuge.

There have been studies of aspects of the ecology of the pond done over the years, both in the public and private sector. However, the studies have frequently concentrated on one aspect of the problem or another. To the best of my knowledge there has been no study directed at restoring Kealia Pond to its natural state.

H.R. 3176 requires a study to identify ways of dealing with these man-made plagues of dust, bugs and rotting fish. My constituents recognize the value of the pond and its contribution to preserving native Hawaiian endangered species. They want to see Kealia Pond restored to its natural state with its native fauna. My bill requires that the Interior Department conduct a study to determine ways to achieve that goal. Once we know the way forward, we can solve the problems that man's actions have caused to the ecology of Kealia Pond.

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